

*Magne Dypedahl*

## **Reading *Snow Falling on Cedars* as a Historical (Crime) Novel**

### **Introduction**

“The accused man, Kabuo Miyamoto, sat proudly upright with a rigid grace, his palms placed softly on the defendant’s table – the posture of a man who has detached himself insofar as this is possible at his own trial.”<sup>1</sup> These are the opening lines of David Guterson’s novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*, published in 1995. The setting is a fictional island in the Puget Sound outside Seattle, Washington, in 1954. The trial is about to begin. Kabuo Miyamoto, an American fisherman of Japanese descent, has already been exiled in the county jail for seventy-seven days, or the entire fall. He is charged with the murder of another fisherman, Carl Heine, an American of German descent.

In this article I will attempt to view the novel as a historical novel. Although *Snow Falling on Cedars* primarily portrays individual destiny and life on San Piedro Island, the novel also gives insight into aspects of American culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Regardless of how the novel is read or analyzed, however, the alleged crime remains a central element of the plot and the structure of the novel. I will therefore start by comparing the structure of the novel with typical crime story formulas.

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<sup>1</sup> David Guterson: *Snow Falling on Cedars*. New York: 1995, 3. Hereafter referred to as SFoC.

## The Formula of the Classical Crime Story

In an interview Guterson has referred to Anton Chekhov and Jane Austen as models of style and structure.<sup>2</sup> The influence of these writers on Guterson is quite evident, but when it comes to his way of structuring *Snow Falling on Cedars* and creating suspense, I would also argue that he writes in accordance with the conventions of the classical detective story. According to John G. Cawelti, the formula of the classical detective story can be described as a conventional way of defining and developing (1) “a particular kind of situation or situations,” (2) “a pattern of action or development of this situation,” (3) “a certain group of characters and the relations between them,” and (4) “a setting or type of setting appropriate to the characters and action.”<sup>3</sup>

The development of the story or the situation in *Snow Falling on Cedars* fulfills many of the conventions of the classical detective story. The central element for creating tension in the novel is the alleged crime. Slowly the story develops from the opening of the trial to the day when the jurors are supposed to announce their verdict. Guterson also makes frequent use of flashbacks to fill in more information about the characters and the history of the island community. Through these flashbacks we are also introduced to a romantic subplot which involves the protagonist of the novel, the journalist Ishmael Chambers, and Kabuo Miyamoto’s wife, Hatsue.

As far as the pattern of action is concerned, the central factors are the trial itself and the choices Ishmael makes when he tries to find out more about the alleged murder. As Edgar Allan Poe defined it, “the detective story formula centers upon the detective’s investigation and solution of the crime.”<sup>4</sup> If the novel is compared to the classical detective story formula, Ishmael has the role of the investigator or the detective. The climax in the novel occurs when Ishmael decides to reveal what he has found out about a freighter which came so close to Carl Heine’s boat that “he fell and hit his head on something and slid on out of the boat.” (SFoC, 454)

As regards the characters and relationships between the characters in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, the conventional roles are covered, but not necessarily in the most conventional fashion. According to Poe’s formula, “the

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen Kanner: “A Wonderful Irony: The Quietest of Books Makes the Splashiest Debut”. 1996. <http://www.bookpage.com/9601bp/fiction/snowfallingoncedars.html> (19.03.2001).

<sup>3</sup> John G. Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago, London: 1976, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 81.

classical detective story required four main roles: (a) a victim; (b) the criminal; (c) the detective; and (d) those threatened by the crime or incapable of solving it.”<sup>5</sup> The deceased, Carl Heine, is of course the victim of the alleged crime, but it is rather Kabuo and Hatsue who attract the sympathy of the reader. When Ishmael finds out that the death of Carl Heine was an accident, Kabuo and his family also turn out to be the real victims of this story.

By the same token the roles are reversed for the alleged victims of the story too. A character who turns out to be more of a criminal than a victim is Carl Heine’s mother, Etta. She denied Kabuo Miyamoto the right to buy the piece of land which he was morally entitled to, and instead sold it to a farmer named Ole Jurgensen. Kabuo’s father, Zenhichi Miyamoto, had missed the last two out of sixteen payments for the land, but the reason was that he and his family had been sent off to a relocation camp for Japanese Americans in March 1942.

Kabuo’s father could not sign the contract himself because several western states had passed “alien land laws” denying non-citizens the right to own land.<sup>6</sup> In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Japanese immigrants could not become naturalized American citizens.<sup>7</sup> This meant that none of the first-generation Japanese Americans, or *Issei*, were American citizens. Kabuo, on the other hand, was an American citizen because he was as a second-generation Japanese American, or *Nisei*, born in the United States. He would have been able to sign the contract in September 1942, when he turned 20. When he came back to sign the contract in 1945, however, he found out that Etta Heine had sold the land after her husband died in 1944. Legally, she had done nothing wrong, but morally it was not right. To make things even worse, after the war Carl Heine bought the land which should have belonged to Kabuo. When Kabuo later asked whether he could buy the land from him, Carl refused on the grounds that he did not want to upset his mother.

Nevertheless, there are others who are more to blame for the imprisonment of Kabuo than the Heine family. The attitude of coroner Whaley shows that the arrest of Kabuo is not entirely coincidental. Whaley suggests that “a narrow, flat object about two inches wide – had left its telltale out-

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<sup>5</sup> Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Yang Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”. Alice Yang Murray (ed.): *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* Boston, New York: 2000, 3–26 (5).

<sup>7</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 5–6.

line behind in the deceased man's head." (SFoC, 55) By comparing this wound to a wound typically left by Japanese soldiers trained in the art of *kendo* (stick fighting), he indirectly suggests that the wound was not inflicted by accident. When the sheriff, Art Moran, shows interest in these speculations, Whaley replies: "You want to play Sherlock Holmes?" Art Moran is hesitant, but nevertheless Whaley says to him that "if he were inclined to play Sherlock Holmes he ought to start looking for a Jap with a bloody gun butt – a right-handed Jap, to be precise." (SFoC, 59) As a result, Kabuo is arrested. After all, he was well trained in the art of kendo.

Other criminals in *Snow Falling on Cedars* are pointed out by Kabuo's wife, Hatsue, in a conversation with Ishmael:

'There shouldn't even *be* a trial,' said Hatsue. 'The whole thing is wrong, it's *wrong*.'

'I'm bothered, too, when things are unfair,' Ishmael said to her: 'But sometimes I wonder if unfairness isn't . . . part of things. I wonder if we should even expect fairness, if we should assume we have some sort of right to it. Or if –'

'I'm not talking about the whole universe,' cut in Hatsue. 'I'm talking about people – the sheriff, that prosecutor, the judge, you. People who can do things because they run newspapers or arrest people or convict them or decide about their lives. People don't have to be unfair, do they? That isn't just part of things, when people are unfair to somebody.' (SFoC, 325–326)

Ishmael avoids becoming one of the criminals by actually *doing* something and solving the mystery. He personifies justice and rationality, and he even has the qualities of the classical hero. Although he is a young man of thirty-one, he has a "hardened face," the "eyes of a war veteran," and "only one arm," having lost the other arm in battle with Japanese soldiers in the Pacific Ocean. (SFoC, 7) As a local reporter he seems well-suited for the roles of detective and bystander since he is both an insider and an outsider in the San Piedro community. He is an insider in the sense that he knows the island and most of its inhabitants, and he does not feel the out-of-town reporters' contempt for them. On the other hand, he has been away for many years and seems to have distanced himself from the other islanders.

Actually, Ishmael does not want to take an active part in the investigation of the alleged crime. In the beginning of the novel he is simply an observant journalist who reports the events to his newspaper readers. Like Ishmael in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ishmael Chambers is an impartial, open-minded observer who can see both the good and the evil in people. It is probably this quality which inevitably turns him into an investigating reporter. Although he is fairly reluctant to become too involved, he simply cannot avoid seeking the truth.

Ishmael's integrity and truthfulness are only two factors which make him a typical crime story hero. By solving the mystery of Carl Heine's death, he also rescues the suspect, Kabuo Miyamoto, from the condemnation of society and imprisonment. Kabuo is clearly about to be convicted due to a combination of unfortunate circumstances, prejudiced feelings and anti-Japanese sentiment. The fact that Ishmael is reluctant to follow the ideals of his father, the founder of the *San Pedro Review*, makes him even more heroic. Often he does not want to do "the right thing," but he ends up doing it anyway.

Furthermore, both the jurors and the whole European American Community on San Pedro island play the role of "those threatened by the crime or incapable of solving it."<sup>8</sup> Passive bystanders may indirectly become accomplices if they do not question what is going on. The islanders are unable to solve the mystery or question the theories of the police because prejudiced feelings and negative stereotypes have become too influential in the investigation and the preparation for the trial. Many of them feel threatened by the crime. And Kabuo's physical strength and cold appearance in the courtroom tend to confirm their suspicions and prejudices against the Japanese Americans.

Finally, the setting of *Snow Falling on Cedars* seems well suited for a crime story. According to Cawelti, "Poe again set the pattern for the classical detective story"<sup>9</sup> by using isolated settings, which stand in contrast to the outside world. The setting in *Snow Falling on Cedars* is not limited to an isolated house, but the small community of about five thousand souls on an imaginary island in the Puget Sound in the state of Washington is indeed an isolated setting and thus well suited for a mystery story.

### ***Snow Falling on Cedars* as a Historical Novel**

Although *Snow Falling on Cedars* is not based on a true story, it is a novel with many historical topics. General themes such as prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination are central to an understanding of the novel. More specifically, the novel can be said to portray the relationship between European Americans and Japanese Americans on the West Coast before, during, and after World War II. If this relationship is described truthfully, *Snow Falling on Cedars* can contribute to a better understanding of the social

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<sup>8</sup> Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 96.

history of the American West, as well as the mechanisms of stereotyping and prejudice in any society.

In *The Historical Novel*, which is regarded as an authoritative analysis of the historical novel as a genre, Georg Lukács claims that the individual destinies of the characters should be inseparable from social-historical forces with regard to both characterization and action.<sup>10</sup> As far as I can see, *Snow Falling on Cedars* meets this requirement as well as Lukács's other requirements for a good historical novel. Obviously, the characters in the novel are purely fictional, or non-historical, but this does not make the novel less qualified as a historical novel. According to Lukács, "What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality."<sup>11</sup> A historical novel can even be better suited for this purpose than a history book. As Hervey Allen writes, "neither historian nor novelist can reproduce the real past," but the novelist may give "the reader a more vivid, adequate and significant apprehension of past epochs than does the historian."<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, Guterson seems to have succeeded in capturing social forces of the times and giving insight into the causes of tension between European Americans and Japanese Americans.

## The Real Victims

In *Snow Falling on Cedars* it is the alleged criminal, Kabuo, and his family who turn out to be the victims of the story. If the novel is also viewed as a historical novel, the destiny of this Japanese American family should be seen as reflecting the destiny of Japanese Americans in general. Consequently, the arrest and imprisonment of Kabuo Miyamoto can be seen as a repetition of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

On February 14, 1942, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command, recommended the removal of all immigrants of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. According to General DeWitt, "The Japanese race is an enemy race," and "racial affinities are not severed by migration." Furthermore, General Dewitt concluded that the

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<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukács: *The Historical Novel*. (1937). Boston: 1963, 200–201.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács: *The Historical Novel*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Hervey Allen: "History and the Novel". *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol CXXXIII, No. 2. Boston, February, 1944: 119–120.

“very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date” was a “disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.”<sup>13</sup>

General DeWitt’s statements mirrored the anti-Japanese sentiment which came to the surface after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. According to historian John Morton Blum, “Hostility toward the Japanese received continual reinforcement from the reports of the Japanese cruelty during the exhausting battles for Bataan and Corregidor in 1942 and later from other journalistic accounts about island warfare and the suicide bombings by Kamikaze pilots.”<sup>14</sup> Hardly any distinction was made between Japanese soldiers in the Pacific Ocean and the Japanese Americans. According to Blum, “public opinion in 1942 disclosed that [...] the Japanese [...] were deemed treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike.”<sup>15</sup>

Although FBI director J. Edgar Hoover informed U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle that the public hysteria on the West Coast was groundless, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which authorized the War Department to designate military areas from which people could be excluded.<sup>16</sup> At the end of March all Japanese Americans were evacuated from Military Area 1, which comprised the southern part of Arizona and the western parts of Washington, Oregon, and California.

Altogether there were some 127,000 Japanese Americans in the United States (mainland) in 1942, about 112,000 of whom lived on the West Coast.<sup>17</sup> The latter were interned or relocated in one of the ten relocation camps organized by the War Relocation Authority (WRA). About one-third of the relocated Japanese Americans were first-generation immigrants (Issei) who had been denied the right to become naturalized, but the more than 70,000 second-generation (Nisei) and third-generation (Sansei) Japanese Americans were American citizens. However, this was not an issue at the time. As General DeWitt put it: “A Jap’s a Jap [...] It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not.”<sup>18</sup> Not everybody accepted this. A young student called Gordon Hirabayashi was one of the few people who violated the military internment order, resulting in his imprisonment. He challenged the government through the court system, but in 1943 he lost

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<sup>13</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 7.

<sup>14</sup> John Morton Blum: *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II*. San Diego, New York, London: 1976, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Blum: *V Was for Victory*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Blum: *V Was for Victory*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Blum: *V Was for Victory*, 159.

his landmark case in the U.S. Supreme Court, *Hirabayashi vs. United States*.

On the fictional San Piedro island the Japanese Americans were to be evacuated by noon on March 29, 1942. (SFoC, 125) In 1941 there had been 843 people of Japanese descent on the island. Now they were “loaded onto a ship while their white neighbors looked on.” (SFoC, 79) The reactions of the islanders are described in the following way:

The fishermen felt, like most islanders, that this exiling of the Japanese was the right thing to do, and leaned against the cabins of their stern-pickers and bow-pickers with the conviction that the Japanese must go for reasons that made sense: there was a war on and that changed everything. (SFoC, 79)

Etta Heine’s reaction to the relocation of the Japanese Americans was that “They [were] Japs, [...] We are in a war with them. We can’t have spies around.” (SFoC, 126)

Among the alleged spies who had to leave San Piedro island was Kabuo. He joined the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team to serve as an American soldier in Europe. (SFoC, 92) Many young Japanese American men, both from Hawaii and the mainland, chose to enlist as soldiers after the Department of War had decided to form a separate unit for the Nisei. Many of the young men joined the army in order to show their loyalty to the United States. Loyal Americans should of course not have been sent to relocation camps in the first place, but this is one of the many ironies in the history of the Japanese Americans on the West Coast.

Organized as the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, the Nisei unit fought bravely in Europe. In fact they earned the name “The Purple Heart Regiment” because they became the most decorated unit in the history of the United States.<sup>19</sup> After the war Kabuo did not get the same veteran status as for instance Ishmael Chambers. Ishmael had “the advantage of the prominently wounded and of any veteran whose war years are forever a mystery to the uninitiated.” (SFoC, 39)

Bavarian-born Etta Heine’s statements about enemies, uttered with a German accent, may be looked upon as just another ironic detail in the novel, but her feelings reflect the fact that the German Americans and Italian Americans generally experienced no particular discrimination arising from the war situation. General DeWitt actually wanted to exclude all non-

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<sup>19</sup> Valerie J. Matsumoto: “Amache”. Alice Yang Murray (ed.): *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* Boston, New York: 2000, 121–150 (138).



citizens, or “enemy aliens”, from the West Coast, but he was overruled.<sup>20</sup> In many cases it would also have been difficult to distinguish German Americans and Italian Americans from other European Americans. The German Americans in particular were much more assimilated into mainstream American culture than the Japanese Americans were.

Furthermore, an exclusion of all “enemy aliens” from the West Coast would for instance have resulted in the uprooting of the parents of Italian American sports star Joe DiMaggio.<sup>21</sup> Such a result would surely have been a political catastrophe. Removing the Japanese Americans, on the other hand, could be politically rewarding due to the anti-Japanese sentiment. Naturally, there was no reason to evacuate innocent German Americans or Italian Americans from the West Coast or the East Coast, in spite of the military threat of German submarines just off the East Coast. The unfairness lies in the fact that innocent and defenseless Japanese Americans were uprooted and imprisoned against their will. Since they had little or no political influence in the western states, there was very little they could do to let their voices be heard in Washington, D.C.

Moreover, the inconsistency of the removal policy is illustrated by the situation in Hawaii. About 158,000 people of Japanese descent lived there. Although Hawaii had not yet become a state, the islands were strategically more important for the war effort in the Pacific Ocean than the West Coast was. Indeed the Japanese Americans were viewed with suspicion, but removing them would have been hazardous to local industry and the war effort.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the Japanese Americans on the West Coast were not needed or wanted in local industries. In other words, they were the perfect scapegoats.

Such scapegoats were welcome in the first phase of the war in the Pacific Ocean when the people on the West Coast felt vulnerable to Japanese attacks and the military campaigns of the United States were not going well. In such a situation it can be difficult to find an appropriate target for frustration and aggression. According to Perry R. Hinton, it is “through the redirected aggression the scapegoated group are seen in negative and stereotypical terms.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the Japanese Americans were the victims of this type of redirected aggression.

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<sup>20</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Perry R. Hinton: *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*. Sussex: 2000, 15.

## The Real Criminals

One might claim that the internment policy was a result of many unfortunate circumstances. War time hysteria can explain a lot and even excuse a few things. Still, there is no doubt that the internment of the Japanese Americans must have been fueled by racial stereotypes and anti-Japanese sentiment.<sup>24</sup>

In the novel Hatsue blames the people “who can do things” (SFoC, 326) for the arrest of Kabuo. Fortunately, Ishmael comes forward with his information before it is too late and Kabuo is acquitted. Many of the people who could “do things” during World War II aired views and made decisions which in my opinion could not be justified regardless of the war hysteria. Many of them were journalists and politicians. The list includes names such as General DeWitt, U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In California several influential politicians, including California Attorney General Earl Warren, “demanded that Washington take action to protect the West Coast from ‘Jap’ spies.”<sup>25</sup> In February 1942, syndicated columnist Westbrook Pegler commented that “the Japanese in California should be under armed guard [...] and to hell with habeas corpus until the danger is over.”<sup>26</sup>

Some of these people may just have been misled by their own prejudiced feelings and a lack of balanced information, but others knew the truth. If they had come forward and done the right thing, internment could have been avoided. By the end of December 1941 General DeWitt even concluded that “no invasion was likely.”<sup>27</sup> In 1981–82 researchers discovered documents in the National Archives which showed that Justice Department attorneys had withheld information attesting the loyalty of Japanese Americans in the early 1940s.<sup>28</sup> Because people did not “do the right thing,” the Japanese Americans had to spend more than three years in relocation camps. Several decades would pass before the relocation of about 112,000 people was recognized as a crime.

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<sup>24</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Murray: “The Internment of Japanese Americans”, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Blum: *V Was for Victory*, 155.

<sup>27</sup> John Leo: “An Apology to Japanese Americans”. *TIME Magazine*: May 2, 1988, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Teruo Hata, Dominguez Hills, Nadine Ishitani Hata: *Japanese Americans and World War II*. Illinois: 1995, 27.

## The Real Detectives

Ishmael Chambers finds the information which proves Kabuo's innocence. However, it is Hatsue who appeals to Ishmael's conscience and really makes him pursue the case and make the right choices. With regard to the relocation of the Japanese Americans, it has also been the Japanese Americans themselves who have pursued the case and made people who could do something look at the legitimacy of the wartime internment again.

Professor Gordon Hirabayashi, who lost his case in the Supreme Court in 1943, has never managed to get the Supreme Court to reconsider his case, but he was at least partly satisfied when his conviction was overturned by a Court of Appeals in 1987. A judge concluded that "General DeWitt was a racist" and that his actions were "based on racism rather than military necessity."<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, many people who were involved in the internment of the Japanese Americans later realized that they had been wrong. U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle's later assessment of the relocation policy was: "The program was ill advised, unnecessary and unnecessarily cruel."<sup>30</sup> California Attorney General Earl Warren became one of the most liberal and famous Chief Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, and he deeply regretted what had happened to the Japanese Americans during World War II.

In the first three decades after the war there was disagreement among Japanese Americans concerning a demand for a government account of the internment order, but in 1976 when President Gerald R. Ford, as part of the bicentennial celebrations, acknowledged that the evacuation had been wrong, the struggle for redress could begin.<sup>31</sup> In 1979 Congress established a commission which would "determine whether a wrong was committed." The commission's public hearings in major cities "ended decades of silence about [the Japanese Americans'] wartime experience."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in 1988 all the innocent Japanese Americans were formally freed of any suspicion of disloyalty when Congress passed a bill which would give the 60,000 surviving internees \$20,000 checks. Even though up to 200 former internees were dying each month, the first payments were not made

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Irons: "Gordon Hirabayashi v. United States: 'A Jap's a Jap'". Alice Yang Murray (ed.): *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* Boston, New York: 2000, 65–77 (77).

<sup>30</sup> Leo: "An Apology to Japanese Americans", 70.

<sup>31</sup> Hata, Hills, Hata: *Japanese Americans and World War II*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Hata, Hills Hata: *Japanese Americans and World War II*, 26.

until October 1990.<sup>33</sup> When the first payments were made, however, President George H. Bush signed a formal apology to the Japanese Americans. “We can never fully right the wrongs of the past,” writes Bush. “But we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II.”<sup>34</sup> The Japanese Americans were heard at long last, and the case was solved.

### **“Those who were threatened by the crime or incapable of solving it”**

In *Snow Falling on Cedars* the jurors and the local community represent all those who are “threatened by the crime or incapable of solving it.”<sup>35</sup> Some islanders reflect the same anti-Japanese sentiment which sent so many Japanese Americans to relocation camps in World War II, whereas others do not. Some people are fairly neutral because they do not know any Japanese Americans or do not have any particular feelings about them. On the West Coast in the 1940s most people did not know any Japanese Americans because there were only about 112,000 Japanese Americans in a Caucasian population of almost ten million.<sup>36</sup>

However, many people did oppose the relocation of the Japanese Americans. As Louise Crowley testified in 1981:

I’m a native Seattleite [...] a lot of my friends were of Japanese descent [...] Many of my [friendships] were prematurely and very painfully disrupted and shattered by that evacuation [...] I felt then and still feel a passionate sense of outrage, helplessness, and betrayal. There was nothing anybody could do about it, absolutely nothing. It happened so fast.<sup>37</sup>

Many of those who could do something also reacted. According to Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis, “A number of influential citizens rallied to the

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<sup>33</sup> “Japanese Internees Would Get Money Under a House Bill”. *New York Times*: October 27, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Japanese American Internment: Online Exhibit. <http://www.scu.edu/SCU/Programs/Diversity/exhibit2.html> (23.01.2003).

<sup>35</sup> Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Audrie Girdner, Anne Loftis: *The Great Betrayal: The Evacuation of the Japanese-Americans During World War II*. Ontario, Canada: 1969, 3.

<sup>37</sup> William Minoru Hohri: *Repairing America: An Account of the Movement for Japanese-American Redress*. Washington: 1988, 125.

defense of the Japanese [Americans], among them prominent clergymen and journalists.”<sup>38</sup>

In the novel people with the same types of reaction are represented by Ishmael’s father, Arthur and Etta Heine’s husband, Carl senior. After the war broke out, Arthur Chambers continued to write in his newspaper about both Japanese Americans and other Americans as loyal islanders and Americans. The result was that some people cancelled their subscriptions and a few stores or firms cancelled their advertisements. Many people wanted to treat the Japanese Americans as Americans, but the general anti-Japanese sentiment almost forced everybody to treat them as Japanese. “It ain’t *right*,” Carl senior said about the evacuation of the Japanese Americans on the island: “People are going to take advantage, too.” (SFoC, 125–126) When he died, his wife Etta did just that.

Even in times of war it would obviously have been much more difficult for the government to disregard *habeas corpus* if the majority of people had not, directly or indirectly, accepted what was going on. In a way all the Smiths and Johnsons of the West Coast were accomplices. In the name of “fairness” it can be tempting to treat these European Americans as nameless members of a group free to be stereotyped and criticized. However, as far as ethical standards are concerned there is of course no difference between most of us and decent people like my 85-year-old relative Marguerite Jorgenson or most others who lived on the West Coast in the 1940s and 1950s. Technically speaking, they were no more prejudiced than the average person is today. As the Greek playwright Aeschylus expressed it more than two thousand years ago, “Everyone’s quick to blame the alien.”<sup>39</sup> Most people just trusted whatever journalists, politicians, and others said about the potential threat from Japanese Americans. The European Americans made their judgments based on the information they were given and the prevalent attitudes of the time. That is also how we make judgments today.

## The Real Enemy

It can be a useful history lesson to identify the criminals, the victims, the people who righted the wrongs, and the common people who could not do much about the treatment of the Japanese Americans in the past. However,

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<sup>38</sup> Hohri: *Repairing America*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter: “Understanding Intercultural Communication: An Introduction and Overview”. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter (eds.): *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. California: (9<sup>th</sup> ed.) 2000, 5–16 (5).

if we want to learn something from *Snow Falling on Cedars* and thereby from history itself, I think it is necessary to take a closer look at the human tendencies which can create the truly unfortunate circumstances the Japanese Americans were subject to in the 1940s and 1950s, namely stereotyping and prejudice.

The well-known American journalist Walter Lippmann introduced the term *stereotype* in 1922, in a book called *Public Opinion*. Lippmann argued that a stereotype “imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence.”<sup>40</sup> Ironically, Lippmann supported the evacuation of Japanese Americans on the West Coast 20 years later regardless of “citizenship or ancestry.”<sup>41</sup> Stereotypes are common, and to some extent necessary because they represent a way of storing and categorizing information. However, as Richard Brislin claims, “They become dangerous when people move beyond stereotyping and make decisions based on their stereotypes.”<sup>42</sup> “In many cultures,” Brislin argues, “stereotypes of certain groups are so negative, are so pervasive, and have existed for so many generations that they can be considered part of the culture into which children are socialized. In these cases, the stereotypes become part of people’s prejudiced feelings about other groups.”<sup>43</sup>

According to Brislin, “Prejudice refers to the emotional component of people’s reactions to other groups.”<sup>44</sup> Prejudice can serve many functions, and often serves several functions at the same time. In *Snow Falling on Cedars* many people simply adopt the prevalent attitudes of the time. This is an example of what Brislin refers to as the *adjustment function* of prejudice, which indirectly makes people stay away from people who are unpopular in their own in-group.<sup>45</sup> In the novel there are also many examples of the *ego defensive function* of prejudice, which means that an out-group is blamed for the in-group’s deficiencies. The worst example of this is the internment of the Japanese Americans. The *value expressive function* could mean that the dominant in-group, in this case the European Americans, unconsciously or consciously view their own values and race as superior in order to defend their discrimination of an out-group. Finally, the *knowledge*

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<sup>40</sup> Hinton: *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Girdner, Loftis: *The Great Betrayal*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Brislin: *Understanding Culture’s Influence on Behavior*. Orlando: (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) 2000, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture’s Influence on Behavior*, 208–209.

<sup>44</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture’s Influence on Behavior*, 209.

<sup>45</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture’s Influence on Behavior*, 209–210.

*function* means that people have certain attitudes because it facilitates a neat organization of the world.<sup>46</sup>

Brislin distinguishes between six forms of prejudice, namely (1) intense racism, (2) symbolic racism, (3) tokenism, (4) arm's-length prejudice, (5) real likes and dislikes, and (6) the familiar and the unfamiliar.<sup>47</sup> *Intense racism* centers around the belief that members of a certain out-group "are inferior on such dimensions as intelligence, morals, and an ability to interact in decent society."<sup>48</sup> *Symbolic racism* "is expressed in terms of threats to people's basic values and to the status quo they have become comfortable with in their culture."<sup>49</sup> According to Brislin, "when directly questioned, people assert that out-group members are 'moving too fast' and are making illegitimate demands in their quest for a place in society."<sup>50</sup> *Tokenism* means that some people "harbor negative feelings about an out-group but do not want to admit this to themselves or to others."<sup>51</sup> Often people will speak up against racism and prejudice to show that they are not prejudiced, but they can refuse to have anything to do with an out-group. *Arm's-length prejudice* describes people who treat out-group members in a friendly and seemingly respectful way as long as the relationship does not become too intimate, whereas *real likes or dislikes* are based on one's own beliefs, values, or norms. People often have negative feelings about certain types of behavior because they consider such behavior to be unpleasant or unhealthy. The last category of prejudice, *the familiar and the unfamiliar*, refers to the fact that most people tend to be uncomfortable with an unfamiliar culture. As a result a certain distance between the in-group (we) and the out-group (they) is created.

In *Snow Falling on Cedars* there are many examples of all these forms of prejudice. Etta Heine and coroner Horace Whaley clearly suffer from intense racism. Etta also expresses symbolic racism by not accepting that the hard-working Miyamoto family should move on from being strawberry pickers to landowners and full-fledged neighbors. An example of tokenism is the annual crowning of a young Japanese American girl as princess of the Strawberry Festival. (SFoC, 82) At the same time Japanese Americans were not expected to sit next to European Americans on the bus.

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<sup>46</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 212–214.

<sup>47</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 214–215.

<sup>48</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 214.

<sup>49</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 216.

<sup>50</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 216.

<sup>51</sup> Brislin: *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, 219.

Arm's-length prejudice is very common in the novel, and not only on the part of the European Americans. Mrs. Shigemura tells Hatsue to: "Stay away from white men, [...] and marry a boy of your own kind whose heart is strong and good." (SFoC, 84) Hatsue has internalized this: To Ishmael she says: "'Oceans don't mix .' [...] 'They're different temperatures.' [...] 'They're different from each other.' [...] 'They just are.''" (SFoC, 97) When Hatsue and Ishmael as teenagers discuss their relationship and how wrong it is, they conclude that Hatsue's parents would react more strongly against it than Ishmael's parents would.

Furthermore, real dislikes are nurtured in *Snow Falling on Cedars* by Etta and others. Etta feels uneasy about the food habits and the living conditions of the Japanese Americans, but typically her prejudice is not based on real knowledge of the Japanese. Those who know the Japanese Americans have no complaints, but very few people have this knowledge. Part of the problem is the last category of prejudice: the familiar and the unfamiliar. The distance between the Japanese Americans and the other islanders was created as soon as the first Japanese immigrants came in 1883. Then the census taker neglected to list them by name, and they were referred to as Jap Number 1, Jap Number 2, and so on. (SFoC, 75) During the investigation of the alleged murder in 1954 a fellow fisherman of Kabuo, Dale Middleton, reveals that he does not even know Kabuo's first name. He knows that the ship *Islander* is owned by a Miyamoto, but not which of the Miyamoto brothers. As Dale says: "Suckers all look alike," and "Never could tell them guys apart." (SFoC, 43) Since it is easier to feel indifferent toward Jap Number 3 than toward a person with a name and individual characteristics, such a distance often leads to stereotypes and prejudice. As his surname suggests, Dale Middleton is the average man and a representative of "Middletowns" all over the world.

## Conclusion

After the charges against the accused man had been dismissed in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Ishmael Chambers sits down at his typewriter and tries "to imagine the truth of what had happened." (SFoC, 454) The way I interpret the novel that is also what David Guterson has done in writing this story. In my opinion, by adding flesh, blood, and a metaphorical dimension to the story of the Japanese Americans, Guterson's fictional narrative represents reality very well; perhaps just as truthfully as any historical narrative



can. As Ernest E. Leisy claims, “historical fiction creates the illusion of a past experience with more particularity than does the historical record.”<sup>52</sup>

In my opinion, the human tendency to stereotype and harbor prejudice is in many ways the source of all the crimes in *Snow Falling on Cedars*. In the novel an innocent man spent close to three months in jail. In the case of the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II, innocent Japanese Americans spent more than three years in relocations camps. The novel shows what can happen when people with power in a dominant in-group and too many others are influenced by stereotypes and prejudice. Prejudiced feelings easily turn into discrimination when a group of people feels threatened or when the need to show some action under pressure becomes overwhelming.

I have argued that *Snow Falling on Cedars*, in addition to its many other qualities, can be read as a historical novel. In my opinion, it is also a crime story, but not only about crimes in the past. Today the main concern is not Japanese Americans. They are still stereotyped, but now as intelligent and well-educated people. These stereotypes are at least far less harmful. More generally, it can be claimed that the novel is about the relationship between in-groups and out-groups and the potential crimes any dominant group can commit. And we are all potential accomplices.

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<sup>52</sup> Ernest E. Leisy: *The American Historical Novel*. Oklahoma: 1950, 7.